

# Qualities of the Ideal Protégé

COL Mark A. Melanson, MS, USA

## INTRODUCTION

A vital responsibility of senior leaders is to mentor junior officers so that they can one day step forward and lead the Army Medical Department. One of the key things that a good mentor looks for when selecting a protégé is whether or not a particular junior officer has potential. Then, there is the natural question: what exactly is potential? Ultimately, potential manifests itself as the ability to one day, through growth, study, and practice, become a fully developed and highly competent Army officer. So, what does potential actually look like? For me, there are certain unique traits that I look for as evidence of true potential in a prospective protégé. This short list of qualities is based upon nearly a decade of research on the subject of mentoring, observing the junior officers that I have mentored over the years (both successfully and unsuccessfully), and an assessment of my own strengths and weaknesses as a protégé. It is hoped that by identifying and developing these qualities, junior officers who have mentors or are seeking mentorship will experience the deepest and fullest benefits of mentoring.

## LOVE OF LEARNING

The first important quality of an ideal protégé is to be a true lover of learning. This is not surprising since the entire mentoring relationship revolves around the conveyance of knowledge and wisdom from mentor to protégé. (Coincidentally, the quality of being a consummate student is also a key trait in highly successful mentors.<sup>1</sup>) Therefore, in order for this partnership to work, the protégé must truly want to learn. For the ideal protégé, the mentoring experience is a journey towards deep personal and professional growth. By finding a revered and trusted mentor, the junior officer is fully engaged in the process of growing and learning under the tutelage of that seasoned senior officer. This special relationship can be very short or last an entire career, or even longer.

## SELF-STARTER

For me, an ideal protégé is a true self-starter. This protégé knows that he or she is the one primarily respon-

sible for his or her career being successful. Therefore, this young leader does not sit around waiting to be told what to do and takes charge of his or her own development. By being proactive, the ideal protégé is constantly assessing his or her strengths and weaknesses and how to improve and grow. Likewise, when the chance to learn presents itself, this junior officer is the first one to stand up and seize the opportunity. While remaining a full mentoring partner with his or her mentor, the junior officer is also doing a lot of self-development work on his or her own. When it is all said and done, the self-starting protégé actually leads the mentoring experience, with the mentor coming along for the ride and providing needed help and guidance.

## CONFIDENCE

In order to be successful as a protégé (and an Army leader for that matter), one must be confident. I know personally that this can be particularly hard, especially when one is first commissioned and does not yet know very much about being an Army officer. But, with time, experience, and patience, a junior officer will learn and acquire the skills necessary to succeed. It is important to note that this confidence is measured; it is not arrogance or cockiness. That being said, an officer always knows his or her own limitations. So, if you are getting into a situation where you are in over your head, you must quickly recognize this and promptly seek assistance from your mentor. Failure to do this has often been the root cause for ending many an officer's career, regardless of rank.

## RISK TAKER

Despite the real perils mentioned in the previous paragraph, the ability to take risks is a very important trait of the ideal protégé. Today's Army desperately needs officers at all levels who are willing and able to take risks and do what needs to be done to accomplish the mission, often in the absence of guidance. Now, I am not advocating irresponsible or careless risk taking. Rather, I am referring to the ability to assess a situation, understand the mission, and then develop and implement new and innovative courses of actions.

It all boils down to the ability to overcome the fear of doing something new or untested and squarely face the threat of failure. Unfortunately, there is no other way to grow; without taking risks you cannot reach your fullest potential.

## **RESILIENCY**

If a protégé is going to take risks, then sometimes the outcome will be unsuccessful. Hence, mistakes will be made and failures will occur. No one likes to fail, especially hard-charging junior officers (and crusty old colonels like me!). But, the ideal protégé accepts complete responsibility for all mistakes or failures and seeks to fully understand what went wrong and why. This officer does not engage in a blame game or make excuses. Rather, the ideal protégé is reflective and studies personal defeats in order to learn from them, often referred to as failing forward.<sup>2</sup> Then, the junior officer gets up, dusts his or herself off, and tries again. The key to resiliency is to truly accept that no one is perfect, to believe that we can learn from our mistakes, and to realize that it is often from our setbacks and failures that we learn our greatest lessons in life. Therefore, in order to stay the course, a protégé must be resilient.

## **ENTHUSIASM**

For a mentor, one of the most refreshing traits of a desirable protégé is genuine enthusiasm. It is this clear and palpable excitement for the mentoring partnership that continually stokes the fire of this important relationship. As for me personally, it is one of the primary reasons that I enjoy being a mentor. A protégé's enthusiasm is contagious and can jump-start and revitalize the mentoring experience. It also helps the protégé find the energy and maintain the focus required to do the hard work that so often accompanies personal and professional growth. So, be excited about being a protégé and embarking on the unique journey of self-discovery that is mentoring.

## **OPEN-MINDED**

Being open minded to a mentor's advice is not difficult when one is a new junior officer and knows very little about Army officership. However, as one grows in knowledge and experience, it can become easy for a protégé to assume that he or she has all of the answers and needs no help. The ideal protégé remembers that the mentor has vastly more experience and precious wisdom to share. Hence, the protégé

listens to advice given and carefully considers it, rather than disregarding it out of hand. This includes constructive feedback that may seem negative and may be difficult to hear. By being open-minded to new and different ways of looking at situations and approaching problem solving, the ideal protégé is more able to experience the full spectrum of mentoring.

## **COMMITMENT**

Commitment is the glue that keeps the mentoring relationship together. Without it, the mentorship will inevitably die a quiet death. To avoid this, the ideal protégé is deeply committed to being mentored. This means that the protégé faithfully attends mentoring sessions, completes assigned homework, and keeps promises that are made. While the Protégé's commitment is first and foremost to the mentor, it is also a commitment to one's self and to reaping the fullest benefits of the mentoring experience. From my observations over the years, the most committed protégés usually end up as the most successful.

## **LOYALTY**

Without trust, there is no mentoring relationship. It is within this safe environment that the mentor and protégé can be open and honest. For the protégé, it is the chance to ask potentially embarrassing questions. Likewise, the mentor can also share past blunders and failures that have important lessons to teach the protégé. In order for this candid dialogue to occur and continue, both members must maintain confidences. All of this simply comes down to loyalty. The protégé must be loyal to the mentor and not divulge anything confidential without the mentor's blessing. Always remember, trust is hard to earn and can be lost so very easily.

## **GRATITUDE**

The final quality of the ideal protégé is gratitude and it is the most important. The ideal protégé is always grateful to his or her mentor. The mentor is taking time out of the busy duty day (and often during off-duty time) solely for the purpose of helping the protégé develop and grow. As mentioned above, the mentor is also sharing personal mistakes and setbacks so that the protégé can learn from them. Given that, the protégé must be appreciative of this gift of mentoring. In my opinion, the best way to sincerely show gratitude is for you to take what you have learned and share it with others. In order to do this, you must be willing to "pay

## Qualities of the Ideal Protégé

it forward” and ultimately become a mentor yourself. This is how I have chosen to repay the superb officers that have mentored me and are mentoring me still. Indeed, the astute reader will quickly recognize that this very article is but another example of my humbly paying it forward.

### SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to share what I view as 10 important qualities of an ideal protégé. First, protégés must have a deep-seated love of learning that drives them to make the most out of the mentoring partnership. Next, protégés must be self-starters who take personal charge of their mentoring. Confidence is vital so that the junior officer can face the many challenges that lay ahead in any Army career. Careful risk taking is necessary so that the protégé can reach his or her greatest potential. Bouncing back from mistakes and failures is crucial for protégés, so they must be resilient. Ongoing enthusiasm is the fuel that sustains the mentoring relationship over time. By being open-minded, a protégé carefully considers all advice, including constructive criticism, that the mentor shares along the uphill path to wisdom.

Remember that commitment is the very glue holding the mentoring relationship together. Also, protégés remain loyal to their mentors by always maintaining confidences. Most important, an ideal protégé is truly grateful for all the things that the mentor has done and repays that debt by also becoming a mentor. In closing, it is hoped that by developing these qualities, present and future protégés will get the most out of their mentoring partnerships and keep the age-old spirit of mentorship alive.

---

### REFERENCE

1. Melanson MA. Evolving roles of highly successful mentors. *Army Med Dept J*. October–December 2007: 37-39.
2. Maxwell JC. *Failing Forward*. Corning, CA: Nelson Books; 2000:191-192.

---

### AUTHOR

COL Melanson is the Chief of Health Physics at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, DC, and the Radiological Hygiene Consultant to The Army Surgeon General.

